

I know you hate the smell of Cigarette Smoke

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I know you hate the smell of Cigarette Smoke

by [KatePryde](#)

Summary

The world ended and they're living in a prison and she sleeps in a jail cell and all they know is death and struggle these days, but Beth Greene is still trying to figure out exactly how she got here. Here, sitting on the steps of a cell with a blood covered baby trying to nurse on her.

"She made me take them too," she tells them, "Just in case of this."

Maybe she's seventeen now, but one thing is certain. She's a mother to a child she didn't give birth to.

Chapter 1: Chapter One

They had found them one day when they were scavenging. They hadn't been looking for them specifically, they had been looking for anything and everything they could use to make it just a few more days. The town was nothing much to begin with and had been picked over and there was no making a permanent home there, but they still looking with the hope that there might be something useful. Lori's eyes had lit up when they saw the small fertility clinic and she had practically begged Rick to clear it so they could search it. Honestly, she didn't have to beg. Rick would have done anything to get her everything she might need. Beth had looked surprised when Lori had jerked her inside with Rick coming up quietly behind them, Daryl close at his back.

"Hurry," he had whispered as he looked up and down the hall.

And they had.

Lori's eyes had lit up when they found the hormones and the lactation aids. It was all they found of course, because who would be crazy enough to try to bring a child into a world like this? Anything else medical and useful had been taken long ago. Beth helped her stuff them into her bag and hadn't protested when Lori shoved the rest into the sack hanging from her belt. In fact, she didn't protest until later that night when Lori gave her some of the pills and the cookies. They were sitting a little ways away from the rest of the group, eating some squirrel or possum or whatever it was that Daryl had managed to shoot that day and drinking water from the pot they had boiling over the small fire they had dared to light. Lori pressed them back into her hand when Beth refused to take them.

"Please Beth," she begged, "Just in case."

As soon as Lori said that Beth knew she had lost the argument. She took the pills and ate the cookies without complaining, and didn't even say anything when she noticed that Lori was giving her more of the medicine than she was taking for herself. Beth knew better than to protest it, because Rick and the others were already worried enough and she didn't want to worry them more. She's Beth and she knows she's not like the rest of them and she doesn't do much because she isn't able to do much, not like the others. She walks with them and holds a weapon and sometimes she kills a walker but at the end of the day she sings at the campfire and that seems to be all she can do. She can sing and she can make stupid promises. She doesn't say anything when her breasts get tender and start to swell up a size or two. No one seems to notice anyway.

She made a stupid promise that first night at the prison. "This could be a good place to have the baby," she had promised Lori, "Safe." Lori had had this look on her face, and Beth knows now that she had never once thought that she was gonna make it. She's proven right a few days later when Maggie and Carl come pushing out of one of the gates with a blood soaked bundle cradled in her sisters arms. One look at Carl's dead eyes and they all knew. Beth felt her chest tighten at the sounds of the baby crying and unable to stop herself she darts forward. Glen has Maggie in his arms, the baby pressed between them. Beth reaches down

and take the little thing, drawing it close to her chest. It's little head turns and the body twists in her arms, seeking and searching. A low whine is heard and Beth yanks her tank top to the side, uncaring of who sees. The blanket falls away and it's a girl, it's not an it. Everyone is staring at her now, but she doesn't care.

Beth isn't even certain if anything is coming out or if the baby is just nursing on her to nurse. It's satisfying an ache that she's had since Lori started feeding her the hormones, however, so she doesn't complain. She's standing in a prison yard surrounded by the undead, the body of this baby's mother is somewhere inside a dark hallway, there's a half-broken man and child not ten feet from her, and their family is standing around staring at her like they've never seen her before, and all Beth is doing is trying to figure out exactly how she got here.

Chapter 2

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Bethy?"

Beth doesn't even look up from the baby she is nursing.

"Did you think it was a good idea to promise Lori that you'd kill her, Daddy?"

Hershel is silent after that. They're all silent now, and Beth walks among them like a ghost. Walking and carrying and nursing until she's sure her arms might just fall off. Hershel leans on his crutch, his lower leg a missing piece of himself now, staring at her, his eyes following her wherever she goes. Everyone's eyes follow her now, even those other prisoners when they see her coming. They stay away, thankfully. Beth isn't sure what she would do if they tried to talk to her. She's uncomfortable enough as it is.

Carl is her shadow now. He trails after her, always taking the baby after she is done eating, changing the diapers they've fashioned from rags without complaint, laying at the foot of her bedroll where she curls herself around a tiny body at night and soothing the infant whenever she fusses but doesn't want Beth's breast. She cries silently whenever she has a free moment no matter who is looking.

They didn't just lose Lori on that godless day. T-Dog is gone now too, Carol tells them later.

He had slept next to her practically every night, covering her with what blankets he could.

"If we had met before all this, I would have taken you home to Mama. Got some meat on those skinny little bones of yours."

There's a cross up in the prison yard before she even blinks and the world keeps turning and she's got to keep living and there's not any more time for tears. She presses her fingers against the scar on her wrist and takes a deep breath and moves forward with the baby clutched to her chest.

The next morning, Beth stands protectively over one of the tables in the cafeteria. The rest of the group all stands around her, all but Rick of course. They don't know where Rick went. He disappeared inside the block where Lori had died and he still hasn't come out. Hershel has the baby laid out on Beth's tank top, and she stands there shivering in her bra as his looks over every inch of the baby.

"She's gonna need more than just me, isn't she?"

Hershel brushes his hands back over the baby once more before lifting her up and handing her back to Beth. He glances over Beth's shaking form before Carol reaches around her and wraps her up in another worn shirt.

"You're not eating enough either," Hershel tells her, "It's enough for now, but later..."

Maggie and Daryl are gone the next instant, off on a run for baby supplies, for formula, for more food. Beth asks her sister to find more lactation cookies too, just in case. Maggie can't help the disbelieving snort she lets out.

"If we find the formula, you won't need the cookies."

Beth steely eyes frighten her sister though, the blonde girl thinks, and the elder woman nods as she slips away. Beth is left sitting on the stairs, clutching the baby who still doesn't have a name.

Chapter 3

"Guys, they're back!"

Beth's head jerks up from where she's been leaning over the baby. The young girl has eaten everything her father has pressed into her hands the past few hours and drank so much water that she feels ready to burst. But it's not been enough, it won't be enough. The baby keeps sucking and sucking and sucking and nothing has come out for the past several hours. Tears have been streaming down Beth's face as she cries quietly. Carl still hasn't left her side, and Carol has been sitting next to her as well, rubbing her back soothingly and helping her adjust the baby every so often to try different positions that might be more comfortable for them both.

Beth feels as though her body has betrayed her in a way. It wasn't meant to do this now, but it was built to do this. She should be able to do this. Someone should be able to do this. Lori should be here to do this, and then they wouldn't have to worry. But they have to worry, because hardly anything comes out of her small breasts and this baby is going to starve if they can't keep her around until she can eat solid foods.

Beth hears the motorcycle and the sound of shovels and sticks hitting the fence as the others try to draw away the walkers. There's a few scattered gunshots as well, and she assumes it's for the walkers that get too close to the bike. She pulls the baby away from her chest and passes her off to Carl, adjusting her shirt and ignoring the wet spots that seem to be permanently fixed to her now. Carl bounces his sister lightly in his arms as she screams and Beth pretends not to notice how everyone always seems to look embarrassed around her now. She wonders if they would have looked at Lori the same way if the woman had lived.

Daryl and Maggie stride into the room full of purpose, and Maggie's backpack is full and bursting with supplies. Beth lets out a small sigh of relief. At least for now she won't be the only source of the baby's food.

"Beth, come here!" Maggie calls out and Beth hurries to her side to the supplies. She puts together a bottle swiftly and watches as Maggie fills it with water, shaking it roughly. She looks through the rest of the pile in front of her as behind her, Daryl takes the baby from Carl. Beth digs through the bag.

"No cookies?" she couldn't help but ask.

Her sister avoids her gaze.

"Maggie..."

"We found the formula, alright Beth. That's enough!"

The resounding crack echoes throughout the room and Maggie staggers back as the red mark from Beth's hand spreads across her face.

"It'll be your fault if she runs out of formula and I don't have enough to feed her."

"Bethy!"

Beth ignores her father and everyone else, stepping up to Daryl as he bounces the baby in his arms. Carl takes the bottle from a shell-shocked Maggie as Glenn and the others walk in from outside, and they all watch as he hands the bottle to Daryl. Daryl tips it up immediately, placing it gently between the lips of the desperate infant. Beth stands behind Carl and places her hands on his shoulders, trying to calm the storm raging inside of her. They all let out a sigh of relief as the small thing has no trouble drinking from the bottle.

"She got a name yet?" Daryl wants to know.

Carl looks up at Beth, who shakes her head at him.

"She's more yours than mine," she tells the boy.

"Not yet," Carl says quietly, "Was thinking....maybe....Sophia?"

Carol lets out a shaky breath and runs her hand across her eyes. They all pretend not to notice the tears streaming down her face.

Carl keeps listing off the names of all the women they have lost, and to his credit, his voice doesn't crack until he says, "Lori."

Chapter 4

It's hard to describe watching the world burn. It's hard to describe watching the people you love die and come back as something else. It's hard to describe wanting to just close your eyes and slip away because your body can't take another ounce of hurt or pain or desolation.

Beth ran out of words a long time ago.

Beth ran out of words the same time she slid the blade across her wrist.

Maybe she can explain this, though. She's ready to jump in front of a walker for this little thing in her arms. She's ready to take a bullet and die if it means that this baby will be safe. There's a new coiling in her chest every time the baby cries. Beth walks around practically topless now, clad in nothing but a sports-bra and a paper-thin tank top that is stretched out so badly she's surprised it's not ripped and some ragged blue jeans. Maggie glares at her, but Beth ignores her. It's easy to ignore Maggie when there's a baby sucking on her chest.

Beth wonders if she should feel guilty. This baby should have had Lori, a mother, a mother who could love her and feed her and who already knew what to do (Beth knows nothing and will probably never know anything) and instead she's left with a sixteen-seventeen (how old is she now?) year old girl with no idea how she's even still alive a year after the world went to shit.

And now Rick has gone to shit and Lori has been eaten and Beth is nothing more than a wet nurse.

There's no other word to describe it.

She cradles the small bundle in her hands and presses her dry lips to the baby's forehead. The infant is still squalling, and on instinct Beth starts to rock back and forth gently. They're all in the common room again, blankets piled on one side where they have all been sleeping. Only Beth doesn't sleep, she spends all night cradling the baby to her chest, praying that keeping her latched will help the milk come in. And once the baby realizes there's nothing there,

"The more they drink, the more you'll make," Lori had told her quietly one night. Beth prays she was right.

There's a gentle touch on her shoulder, and a gruff voice says, "Here."

Something is pressed into her hand and her fingers automatically close around it. Beth peeks through the strands of her hair up at Daryl who is standing over her with a crossbow slung over his shoulder and a knife clutched in his hand. His eyes dart around nervously and he doesn't look directly at her. She glances back down at the pacifier he had given her.

"Fer the kid," he mumbles unnecessarily.

Beth dips her head in thanks. She watches as he darts back over to the window as quickly and silently as he had moved to her. The moonlight catches his figure and she can't help but stare.

He's all harsh lines and rough skin, wrapped up in his ugly ass poncho and staring out the window like whatever is out there has the answers to all the questions in the world.

Beth eases the pacifier between the baby's small lips and it takes a few tries but then the little thing stops crying and starts sucking and there's finally quiet. Beth sighs in relief and keeps rocking back and forth till those little eyes slip closed. Beth stands slowly, still rocking her body back and forth. She moves slowly, trying not to wake the baby. Daryl tilts himself a little towards her as her feet pad softly across the concrete of the floor.

Someone in the bundle on the floor moans quietly, and Beth freezes until they settle back down. Everyone is piled on top of each other wrapped in blankets containing more than a few moth (or maybe mouse) holes. They're warmer than they have been though, tucked close together for warmth. Dirty as they are, tired as they are, Beth thinks that they resemble a group of teenagers gathered together for a night out. All the wear and care and desperation of the previous months has been wiped away. There is a sadness left behind at the loss of Lori and T-Dog, but now they're safe behind thick walls and a fence and somewhere in the prison in the cafeteria stocked with canned goods they haven't found yet but they know it's there. Maybe here, maybe here in these walls they'll have a chance. They'll survive the cold these next few months at least.

Even as scantily clothed as she is in rags for jeans and a thin milk-soaked tank top Beth doesn't feel any chill as she stands next to Daryl. The rough-edged man is a furnace, radiating heat from every inch of of him. He's still looking out the window, one hand on the strap of his crossbow and the other resting on the knife strapped to his hip.

"Wat?" he asks her.

"Have you slept at all?" Beth wants to know.

"Nah," is his reply, "I've got better things ta do."

"Ya need ta sleep, Daryl," Beth chastises him gently.

The hand on his knife reaches out and strokes the baby's cheek gently. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

Chapter 5

The sun is out the next morning, and Beth sits on some stairs outside and watches as the rest of the group clears the fence. Her daddy is standing behind her and they watch as the others drive knives and sharpened sticks through the holes in the wire fence. Looking at the walkers coming closer and closer to the fence and Beth wonders why they all bother.

It's a dangerous thought, she knows. She's had those dangerous thoughts before and they ended with a wide-eyed Maggie screaming for their daddy and Beth laying in the bed with sedatives pumped into her to calm her down. Dangerous thoughts have no place in this world unless you really act on them.

The dangerous thoughts she's having now are nothing like the ones that she's had before though. This dangerous thought is one of hope, one of peace, one that wonders if this might finally be it and they can settle and they can have food and shelter and a place to sleep. This might just be the most dangerous thought she's ever had, because up until now all the peace in her life has been stripped away ever since her mother and brother rose back up again. Months running, months starving, months freezing each night until now. And now maybe there's a glimmer of hope. Light on the dark horizon.

It terrifies her.

Beth presses the baby into her father's hands and reaches for the knife sitting next to him.

"Bethy?" he asks her, but she ignores him.

She ignores all of them as she moves toward the end of the line of people to a small group of walkers bunched together. This hope that she's feeling might mean something, but first they have to keep these walls safe. She's clutching the hilt of the knife so tightly her fingers are turning white. She can feel their eyes all turn to her, but she stays focused on the moaning, groaning monsters in front of her.

They have to keep these walls safe.

It's easy now. Maybe it shouldn't be. It disgusts her, how easy it is. Looking at them, seeing the gaping holes and the dead unseeing eyes, it's easy to forget. But then there's moments like this one where she can't forget and it makes her want to be sick. These were people, once. People with lives and hopes and dreams and none of them wanted to world to go to shit. None of them wanted to be these monsters. It's that thought that drives Beth forward, that lifts her hand up and pushes the small knife into the forehead of the nearest walker.

None of them wanted to be these monsters.

She stopped wondering where they came from a long time ago. Stopped wondering what made them, what drove them to eat people. The blood spurts out as she pulls the knife back and her stomach doesn't even church anymore. This one had been half rotted away already, which is why her small blade had slid through the skull as easily as it had. Beth lets out the

breath she had been holding and moved down the line to the next snarling thing clinging to the fence.

There was a group of them lumbering to the other side. They could smell fresh meat only feet away and didn't understand why they couldn't reach it. Maggie, Glenn, Daryl and the rest have moved on and they're ignoring Beth now in favor of killing the walkers. Because that's what they're all doing, no matter what they pretend or think. They're killing people. These things were people once. They're killing people.

Beth can't help but think about that sometimes. It doesn't bother her the way that it once did, but it still aches in the back of her head. They were people once. This might be her some day.

Carl had been the one to try to change her mind, several weeks ago when they were on the other side of the prison fence. "They're gone, Beth," he had told her, "It's almost a mercy...."

He had trailed off though, and for the first time since she had met him Carl looked as young as he actually was. He looked like a little boy lost in the crowd, uncertain of what to do or who to ask for help. She had stroked his hair gently then, and pushed him to Lori. The woman had given her a grateful smile as she pressed her son to her round and distended stomach. It was one of the last smiles she remembers seeing on Lori's face before she never saw her again.

Beth will always think of the walkers as the people they once were, as the people who were loved and lived and didn't deserve this. Sadly though, it gets a little easier every time she does it. That scares her a little, and a tear slips down her cheek. Murderers, all of them, even if all they're doing is stabbing monsters through a fence.

The sight of blood doesn't bother her anymore, and seeing it splash against her arm when she doesn't pull back quickly enough the second time doesn't even phase her. This new, harsh world has beat all of the bother out of her. She doesn't turn away, doesn't gag, just keeps moving down on instinct, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing until there's nothing left to kill.

Beth rattles the metal of the fence a few more times, waiting and watching on edge until minutes pass by and nothing else comes out of the tree line. There's nothing, not even a whimper from the baby behind her. Just the beautiful sound of quiet. Another tear leaks out and she doesn't even bother to wipe it away. There's still blood on her hands.

Chapter 6

Maggie makes the mistake of telling her she can grow up her in the prison. Her sister is talking about Carl to, and the baby, but the damage is done.

"I'm already old, Maggie. I'm already dead."

This time it's Maggie who slaps her, and then Glenn is pushing in between them and someone is pulling her back and somehow she knows who it is just by the feel of the rough fingers wrapped around her thin bicep. The baby is crying in the sling they made from some scarves, and on instinct she presses the baby to her tightly and bounces on the balls of her feet. Daryl is standing directly behind her and even though the only part of him touching her is his hand somehow Beth still feels safe.

"That's enough!" Her father is snapping out beneath his teeth, and Beth can hear them grinding together as he precariously balances himself on the crutches they had found for him a few days ago. Beth can see his bandage turning red and she knows it'll have to be changed soon. Her father is someone she almost doesn't recognize, but she supposes it's better to lose a leg than lose your life.

"She's got to stop trying to baby me, daddy," Beth whispers, not taking her eyes off of her father, "She wants me to live but she doesn't even think to let me."

"None of this would have happened if that damn woman hadn't put thoughts into your head," Maggie spits back at her angrily.

Beth wants to pull her hair and punch her face and do everything she was never allowed to do when they were children. Maggie is making her see red.

"It's like you don't even trust me to make my own choices."

Truthfully, though, Beth doesn't even trust her own choices anymore right now. What had she been thinking, taking the cookies, nursing this baby, acting like a mother when she wasn't one? What kind of person was she? This wasn't even her baby.

But this is the way Beth was useful. This was the way she provided, the way she did something for the group, the way she pulled her own weight. She couldn't shoot and there was no way to teach her with the limited supply of ammo they had. But she could hold this baby, and take care of her, and take care of everyone if she had to and this was the way she could be useful.

Maggie would never see that though.

Chapter 7

Maybe Maggie will never see anything Beth can do, anything Beth is capable of.

She left with Glenn on a run two days ago and they still haven't come back. Beth can't hide the nervous shake in her hands as she mixes some food in a bowl for them. Hershel has the baby, Carl is sitting down next to her, and she isn't sure where the others are. But Maggie and Glenn are gone and something doesn't feel right in her belly. Beth gets pulled out of her thoughts by a sound that makes her look up. Carl follows her gaze.

They watch through the barred door as Rick steals quietly into the room. He looks.....better. Not whole, there's a new glint to his eyes, a dead and hollow look that they all wear now in their own ways. Beth wonders if he feels anything like the way that she did when she lost her Momma and Shawn, but figures it's a different kind of grief. Momma and Shawn were some of the biggest pieces of her life, sure, but they weren't the other half of her soul. Even in this dark and fucked up world, there's still room for a little bit of light and if that means that Beth still believes in soulmates and having a few minutes of happy-ever-after then that's just fine.

She watches him cautiously. They weren't there to see it, but there was more than half a dozen walker bodies in the same room where they lost Lori and he had come out of the room with something in his hands. Something he had buried. No one had asked any questions.

Beth resists the urge to run for the baby as Rick passes by her. She sucks in a breath and ignores the twinge in her chest as she reminds herself that this baby belongs to him far more than it belongs to her, no matter who happens to be feeding her and taking care of her. The baby is her responsibility, but she isn't hers.

Rick looks uncertain as he approaches her daddy, and when Hershel looks to her for permission Beth just shrugs (ignoring everything in her that was screaming). Beth finally turns around when Carl stands up, pressing a gentle hand to his shoulder. They watch Rick together. This is the first time he's looked at the baby without looking crazy or being covered in blood. Beth wonders for a minute when and where he managed to get himself that clean.

The baby coos in Hershel's arms, unaware of the tension surrounding her, the tension that's about her. Rick reaches under Hershel's hands and scoops the baby to him, jostling her slightly,

"Watch her head!" Beth can't stop herself from biting out from behind clenched teeth.

Rick doesn't even turn his head to look at her or acknowledge what she said. Tears prick her eyelids and she blinks them away quickly. He holds her up to his face and Beth sees the daylight glinting off of his wedding ring.

There's a brief moment of peace in the tension.

Rick moves over to her and rests his hand gently on her cheek. His eyes are shining, but he hasn't let a single tear fall. It looks so natural for him to be holding the baby the way he is,

cradling her in one arm close to his chest with her little head tucked up underneath his neck, She's nuzzling him up, rubbing her small face back and forth against his skin just where the rough scruff of his beard ends. Beth can't help but let out a small smile, for a moment forgetting all the worry in the back of her head.

Rick strokes his fingers across her face. "Thank you," he breathes out shakily. Beth nods.

Rick turns to Carl. "She got a name yet?"

"Nah," his son tells him, "Not yet."

"We've got time for that," Beth can't help but say.

Somehow, it doesn't feel like a hollow promise.

Rick glances out the window and a small smirk appears on his face. "C'mon."

Beth grabs for Hershel's crutches and marvels at the fact that her daddy only having one leg seems normal now. She helps him stand and tucks the metal securely under his arms. Smiling up at him, she follows behind Rick and Carl as they walk outside, always keeping the baby in her line of sight.

They make their way out of the prison into the yard, and god if the sun doesn't feel amazing on her face. Rick holds the baby up and looks back at the building they've just exited.

"Maybe," he says, "Just maybe..."

He doesn't get to finish his thought however, because Beth snatches at his arm. She's looking beyond them, past the buildings to one side of the fence.

"Rick," she says, pointing.

He turns slightly and sees what she sees. There's a group of walkers gathering on one side of the fence. He hands Carl the baby without question and strides off. Beth inches behind him slowly, one hand on her small knife. She watches as he moves closer to the fence, pulling his gun out from the holster as he moves forward. He freezes suddenly, jerking back a little. Beth sees what he sees. It's a woman, covered head to toe in walker blood. She's got a sword strapped to her back and a bandana tied to keep the braids out of her face. She moves like the dead, slow and shuffling and she doesn't make a sound.

She's got a basket in her hands, and lifts it slightly to give it a shake. Drawing nearer to the fence, Beth can see the baby stuff and some canned goods laying inside of it. She turns fearful eyes up to Rick.

"Maggie. Glenn."

They kill the walkers and let the woman in.

Chapter 8

They have to move quickly to let her in. She's wounded, and even though she's covered in walker blood she's bleeding and that smell becomes evident to the dead around her. There's also the risk of getting walker blood in the wound on her leg.

Carl watches her through the fence. "Should we help her?" he wants to know.

"Why is that even a question?" Beth spits out as she waits for Rick to unlock the gate.

The dead have smelled the blood, and it's evident that the woman has already lost a great deal from the way she weakly swings her sword around. She manages to bring down a few before passing out. Beth and Rick take care of the rest, Rick with his gun and Beth with her small knife to get the ones closer to the fence. By the time the rest of the walkers around them fall more are coming out of the treeline. One here, two over there, drawn by the sound of the gunshots. Beth grabs for the basket while Rick goes to the woman.

"She bit?" Hershel calls out from where he and Carl are standing back with the baby.

Rick inspects the wound closely. "Nah, it's a gunshot!"

Beth can't remember if Maggie and Glenn had taken guns or knives.

They rush her inside.

"Carl, I need a blanket," Rick grunts under her weight, "Beth, get some water and a towel."

"We leaving her here?" Carl wants to know.

Here being the cafeteria where they all currently sleep. "We'll clear one of the cell blocks, C maybe, and she'll stay out of it."

Carl spreads the blanket out and Rick lays her down on top of it, taking the water from Beth (who now has the baby again) and washing the blood off of the woman's chest. She jerks back to consciousness at the feeling of the water on her skin and turns wide eyes to the group standing over her. Instinctively she reaches for her sword, but Rick kicks it out of the way.

"Shhh," he croons, "It's alright." She jerks again and he has to grab her by the arms. "Look at me." he waits until she makes eye contact, "Who are you?"

"We're not gonna hurt you," Beth tells her.

"Not unless you try something stupid first." Rick adds.

Beth feels sympathy for this wounded thing at her feet, looking around like a little lost bird unsure of where to fly to next. She smiles in a way that she hopes is reassuring and that doesn't let her desperation show on her face. Who is this woman and where are Maggie and

Glenn? Beth wonders where the others are in the prison. Her thoughts are answered a second later.

"Rick," someone calls out, and then there's Daryl striding into the room. "Who the hell is this?"

"She hasn't told us anything yet," Beth murmurs.

Rick lets her get a drink from the bottle in his hand. "Ya wanna tell us your name?"

Carol comes into the room as well and they all stare down at the woman on the ground. She's used the grate behind her to pull herself into a sitting position. She stares at them with distrust written all over her face.

"We can tend to your wounds for you, give you some food and water and send you on your way," Rick tells us as the rest of them form ranks behind him. They must make a comical sight. Three adults, two with a gun and one with a crossbow, a young boy in a cowboy hat, an old man with one leg, a girl with a knife strapped to her side and a baby in her arms.

"How'd you find the formula?" Beth wanted to know, unable to keep herself quiet.

Maggie. Glenn. It could only be from them. But then where were they and why weren't they back?

"Those supplies were dropped by a young Asian guy. With a pretty girl."

Beth lays a hand on her daddy's shoulder as he clutches his crutches tightly.

"Were they attacked?"

"Not attacked. Taken."

"By who?" Beth demands. "Taken by who?"

"By the same son of a bitch who shot me."

Beth knows before Rick slaps his hand on the woman's wounded leg and squeezes that it's a bad idea. Rick is threatening, the woman is shouting, and Daryl has his crossbow pointed between her eyes. Beth passes the baby off to Carol and slips in between all of them, resting her hand on the loaded weapon. Daryl meets her gaze with a shocked expression.

"Don't." Beth hisses out. She turns her back on him and Rick, keeping herself between them and the woman. "Thank you for the formula," she tells her, "But that's my sister out there. You brought us this stuff, but please, tell me where she is."

The woman clutches a cloth to her leg and sighs. "There's a town. Seventy-five survivors, I think. They were taken there. The man that runs it, calls himself the Governor."

"They got muscle?" Rick wants to know.

"They're military wannabees. Armed sentries, barricades, the whole nine yards."

"Is there a way in?" Beth demands.

"Walkers can't, but we can."

Chapter 9

There's something cutting its way through Beth, a new feeling that she can't quite touch. A desperation, almost, a longing. The last time she had spoken to Maggie they had argued and she wonders if she will ever get to make it right. Carol's got the baby right now, bouncing her back and forth while they all sit and listen to the men talk about what needs to be done. Hershel is wrapping the woman - Michonne's leg and they're all sitting around the tables talking. They all pretend to ignore how her daddy's hands shook as he stitched her up.

"Thanks," Michonne had murmured when he finished.

Anger is coursing through her veins and Beth feels like she just might be able to take it and use the heat to burn down the world. Momma and Shawn are gone, and now Maggie might be too, and there's a fire in Beth that she can't ignore anymore.

She surges to her feet then, causing the chair she was sitting in to fall back with a loud clatter. They all quiet down then, turning to look at this wild girl with her hair flying out of her braid and her little knife clenched between her fists.

"That's my sister," Beth says angrily, "My sister. And you can all keep standing around talking about it, or you can pull those sticks out of your asses and actually get something done."

She ignores her daddy calling her out for her language and disrespect and strides to the door to the outside purposely. Someone jerks her back and as he pulls on her arm she swings out with her hand that hold the knife. Somehow it ends up just underneath Daryl's chin. Short as she is, she has to look up at him as she presses the blade tightly to his skin.

"You don't get to try to stop me, Daryl Dixon."

This is Maggie. This is Glenn. This is her big sister, and they just lost Lori and they just lost T-Dog and Beth can't handle losing anyone else right now. If she stands by and does nothing it's going to haunt her for the rest of her life.

"Beth." Rick is there, next to her, hand on the wrist holding the knife to Daryl's throat.

Tears start running down Beth's face. "I'm going," she chokes out, "I'm going."

Daryl catches her when he legs give out and his arms wrap around her as they both crumple to the floor. "No Beth, not you." His voice is hard as a rock, firm and unforgiving.

"It's Maggie and Glenn," she chokes out, "I could ki..."

"What, Lil' Girl, what could you do? Ya think ya could kill um? You probably could, Ah'll give you that. But Beth, ya ain't ready to live with that yet."

Beth pulls back, ignoring the tears and the snot still streaming down her face. "Don't you dare pretend that I haven't killed before. There's blood on the hands of everyone here."

"There's a difference between killin' walkers and killin' people, Lil' Girl, and you're not ready for that yet."

He's right in a way, but he's also wrong. Walkers are people, or at least they were at one point, and killing is hard no matter what form it takes.

Daryl takes her face in both hands, "We've all got a job, Lil' Girl, and yours is the hardest."

"My job?" Beth wanted to know.

"It'll be hard for those of us going, but you have to stay behind. You have to wait with your daddy, and Carl, and the baby. Keep the fire burning here at home and give us something to come back to. Give Maggie and Glenn something to come back to."

All the fight drains out of her then, and she understands what he isn't saying. She's the one who feeds the baby now, and even though it's good to have the formula there's nothing more important than keeping the main food supply safe. It doesn't make her feel like a cow or anything, but it does give her some sense of importance, she thinks.

"I'll bring her home, Beth, but you've got to be hear waiting for her."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She watches as they load one of the cars they had brought back on an earlier run. Michonne asks her how they cleared the prison, made it safe, and Beth tells her, "We did it as a family."

"All by yourselves? This little group?"

Beth doesn't meet her eyes as she says, "There were others."

Rick is saying something to Carl, handing him the keys to the blocks that they had found earlier. They approach the cars and Rick presses a kiss to the head of the baby in Carol's arms. "Bye. Judith."

Beth smiles weakly.

Judith.

They drive away in silence and Beth watches the car until it fades away in the distance.

Chapter 10

Daryl tells Carol to be careful and stay safe before he leaves as he slings his leather vest over his shoulders. She makes some quip about having nine lives. He promises Carl he'll take care of his old man, he promises Beth he'll bring Maggie and Glenn back. He makes the same promise to Hershel, although this one doesn't involve a knife pressed against his neck.

He wonders if he's going to drown under all of these promises.

He's certainly not going to be able to keep all of them, not in the way promises were meant to be kept.

Little Beth Greene was something else though. Fire and ice and a desperate hunger he had rarely seen before. The girl could barely hold the knife right in her hands and she certainly couldn't shoot but here she was, guns out and blazing, ready to tear down the world to get her sister back. He would have done the same for Merle if his brother had still been alive.

Wouldn't he?

He's not as sure about that anymore.

Rick is driving, Daryl riding shotgun, and he watches the prison fade away in the rearview mirror.

"Think we're gonna make it back?" Oscar asks behind him.

Daryl doesn't answer.

They pull off to the side of the road when Michonne tells them to and pile back out of the car. She tells them about the patrols, how far they go out, how often she thinks they run, and Daryl agrees with her thought that they're better off on foot. They pull all the weapons back out of the car and begin to trek through the woods.

"I know what you did for me," Rick tells him, "For my baby, while I was working things out."

"Beth did more," is Daryl's response, "We're all family now. It's what we do."

They don't use guns out here, so close to the settlement they don't want the gunfire to draw attention to them. They use knives and spears they've made by hand and Daryl's crossbow to take out any walkers that come across their path.

This rescue goes as bad as Daryl thinks it will. It gets dark, and they watch through the leaves as sentries patrol the top of a wall built with metal and tires and clearly fortified. There's no way they can look everywhere, not with their small group. They still sneak in though, and stay hidden in one of the buildings. Michonne doesn't help, she doesn't know as much about

the inside as they thought she did. There's a whispered, heated argument and Daryl says what they're all thinking, "It's the blind leading the blind."

There's a jangle of keys and suddenly they have an answer. Rick punches them and zip ties his hands behind his back and questions him, but he doesn't know anything either. They're bust stowing him in a closet when they hear the gunshots and the running feet from the outside.

They bust out of the building and blend in with the crowd, following the sounds of shouting down the alley and into a different building. Daryl can hear some people coming down the hall at them, and a flashbang takes care of them. It's Maggie, and Glenn, and he doesn't have to break this promise.

And then Merle is alive and the world is falling out from under his feet. This Governor, this man who is probably the reason why Maggie isn't wearing a bra and why Glenn has nearly been beaten to a pulp is someone his brother willingly follows and who knows where they live now. Beth, Lil' Asskicker, and Carl and all the rest and he knows where they are.

Rick stops the apologies spewing out of Glenn and tells them they need to leave.

"But Merle,"

"Merle nothing! Glenn is hurt and we are running and I don't have time for this. I need to know you're with me."

Daryl looks back at Maggie and feels like he's being torn in two. He was raised to believe blood came before anything, but godammit, he promised Beth and he can't break that promise.

"I'm with you."

Chapter 11

Beth can feel the weight of Axel's stare sitting on the back of her neck. He tells her she's good with the baby with this leering smile on his face that she's not sure what to do with. A part of her wonders if he waited for a moment such as this, with all the other men gone to go get Maggie and Glenn and they're left alone in one of the cells. Beth hasn't claimed it for her own yet, and she doesn't think she'll take this one anyway. He's making it feel a little tainted and dirty, saying all these things to her and staring at her with the baby in her arms and Carl standing in front of her. Her daddy was off somewhere staring out a window waiting for some kind of sign, and Beth's free hand snakes down her side to the knife at her hip.

She's ready to stab the man sitting next to her if she has too. She has to be the fire that lights the way home. That's sort of what Daryl said anyway. Can't keep a fire warm and lit and waiting if there's someone trying to get into your pants.

"How old are you anyway?"

"Seventeen." She keeps her voice soft and low, ignoring Carl as he jerks away from the wall with a glare. It doesn't have the intended affect of turning Axel off. If she was a betting woman, finding out she's barely legal only turned him on even more.

After all, what did age matter in the world anywhere now? If she could say what she wanted and mean it and go after it, who was going to stop her from finding a little bit of happy in this hell? Happy wasn't Axel, though. Axel was slime and grease and feeling like she had too much biscuit dough on her hands and it wouldn't come off even with the grease removing dish soap.

"Seventeen....interesting."

But it's not interesting and the fact that he thinks that makes her sick.

Carol appears suddenly, her avenging angel. "Can I speak to you please?"

They disappear down the hall, and Beth and Carl don't even try to pretend they're not eavesdropping. Carol knows they can hear her, it echoes too much in this place for her to not. Axel is giving her this story about being locked up a long while, lacking access to women, Maggie being with Glenn and with Carol being a lesbian...."

Carl and Beth both choke on their laughter.

"Excuse me?" Carol chuckles, "I'm not a lesbian."

Axel seems really confused, makes some comment about her short hair. Carol just keeps staring at him.

"Well, ain't that something interestin'?"

"No, it really isn't."

Carol comes back by the cell. "Don't be alone with him, Beth, okay?"

Beth nods. There's nothing else to say,

Carol takes the baby and lays down, and it's Beth, Carl, and Hershel together when they start talking about supplies and maybe going out on a run in a week or so if the others aren't back. Their conversation is interrupted by a scream from the tombs, and even though Hershel tries to stop them Beth and Carl run off into the darkness. Carl walks in front of her with a flashlight and a silencer on his gun. The screams get louder as they creep through one of the uncleared sections of what they've been calling the Tombs.

It's people, a whole small group of they don't know how many, and Carl and Beth slip into the firmilar position. Beth stabs one that was just about to bite somebody screaming on the ground, and Carl shoots the last one dead while the newcomers beat the others down with the makeshift weapons they're holding in their hands. Beth reaches down and yanks somebody up to her.

"Come on," Carl screams at them.

There's more walkers pouring out of the open doors of the uncleared sections. Somebody falls behind and Carl tells them to leave her, but the bigger African American refuses. He pulls her up over his shoulder while Beth cuts down the closest walker, ignoring the blood that sprays across her cheek.

"Go," she tells them, "GO!"

It's too late by the time they get somewhere safe. The woman is dead. She's gonna turn and they all know it. Carl offers to take care of it, intentionally diverting their attention while Beth locks the door they just came through. The man tells him no, however, and that they'll take care of their own. Handling such business gives the two of them enough time to slip through the other door and lock it.

"What are you doing?" a woman asks them.

"Why'd you just lock us in here?" the man wants to know.

"It's safe in there," Carl tells them, "We'll bring you some food and water in a little while."

The woman approaches the door, grabbing on to the bars and speaking in what Beth assumes is meant to be a peaceful tone, "Open this door."

They haven't met the likes of Beth Greene before, however, "Not on your life."

"We're not animals, dammit. Let us out!"

She sees Hershel standing down the hall and starts panicking then, kicking a screaming to be let out. Beth doesn't hesitate, snatching the gun from Carl and aiming it directly in between the bars.

"Give me a reason," she tells them.

"Sasha," the man pulls on his group members' arm, "Back away. We've got other business to handle."

Beth doesn't move until they're far away from the door.

Chapter 12

This new group makes Beth nervous.

They go back into the room, all of them, taking food and some meager medical supplies in with them. They can't give them everything they have, but they can still try to be decent. Carl keeps tight hold on the keys while Hershel stitches up one of their men. They keep trying to ask questions, but their family barely says anything in response. They have no reason to trust outsiders.

Carol comes in then, passing the baby off to Beth. "She's hungry," the woman says by way of explanation. Beth nods and sits down next to a wall, pulling her shirt off to the side and ignoring everyone's stares. She's got a job to do, after all.

When they first caught sight of Judith there had been a little gasp of shock and something like joy. These new people can't seem to take their eyes off of Beth, not even when Hershel huffs and glares. The woman, Sasha, approaches Beth slowly.

"We never thought we'd see another baby."

She looks Beth up and down critically, shooting her own glare at Hershel. "How are you feeling." Beth resists the urge to clench her fist.

"I didn't give birth to her." she explains slowly.

Sasha looks at her incredulously. "Then where's the mother?"

Beth can't help but glance at Carl sadly. Sasha and the others follow her gaze and they can see it in the set of his shoulders and the unshed tears swimming in his eyes. They don't have to ask what happened to Lori, it's already something that's known.

"I'm sorry."

A comment gets made about what they've been through, and somehow they all know that is their cue to leave. Beth stands up, jostling the baby slightly. Judith already knows her movements though and she stays latched on. They hurry through the door, with the last one coming being Hershel on his crutches.

The man - Tyrese, he keeps talking. Sasha is his sister and they start talking about what brought them here, how they came together, how they stumbled upon the prison, how they lost the woman whose body is curled up in the corner.

"She'll get a proper burial." Hershel promises them, "But listen, our people are coming back. We're pretty close knit, so don't get yourself too comfortable."

"Why not?" Tyrese demands, "Why can't we just stay."

"It's not up to me," Hershel says as he hitches himself through the door. Carl shuts and locks it tight.

"You can see what kind of people we are!" Tyrese insists.

"No," Beth tells him with a shake of her head, "No we can't."

This is proven later when they let them out for a little bit to pick a spot to bury their fallen friend. They walk up and down in a row in front of the field that they've used as a burial ground, where the markers for Lori and T-Dog are. They don't know that Beth is watching with Axel behind her. Carol and Carl are in front of them by one of the guard shacks, walking by the fence line and talking quietly. Beth knows she's not supposed to be alone with Axel, but this is something she needs to do. That one guy, the guy who seemed to be in love with the dead woman, she doesn't trust him.

She's right not too. They don't realize how well the sound carries in this place. Allen starts talking about taking down Carol and Carl, telling them how secure this place is, how helpless they are with the men all gone. Tyrese protests what he's saying, and Allen comes back with taking the place from them before the others come back. Says something about it being survival of the fittest out here, and maybe it is. But he's never met the likes of Beth Greene before. Axel jerks on her arm, gesturing for her to follow him back inside, but she shakes her head. Axel shrugs at her and they move forward.

"Got some tools fer ya'."

Beth notices everything, and it's really hard to notice Tyrese and Sasha pushing themselves to the front to take the shovels before Allen is able to reach for one.

Tyrese and Sasha mumble their thanks while shooting glances behind them at the others. "Let us know if you need anything else," Beth tells them quietly before pulling a pistol out of her back pocket and aiming it square at Allen.

"If that boy down there hadn't let you into our home, then you'd all be walker bait. I want you to remember that the next time you plan on striking us when our back is turned. As it is, I'll be generous and not mention a thing to my daddy or the others. Axel won't either, will you Axel?"

Axel shakes his head furiously.

Beth fixes a glare on them as deadly and cutting as ice. "Little girl or not, I'm the one you should be scared of right now. Come near any of us and try to take what's ours, and I'll be your worst damn nightmare."

Chapter 13

Turns out, Beth doesn't have to be anybody's worse damn nightmare. The others come back, finally, a day or so later. And there's Maggie and Glenn and they're covered in blood and bruises but they're here. They're home, and any anger between the sisters is gone and forgotten with one single smile shared between them.

They got them back, and that's what matters.

It doesn't take long for Beth to realize Daryl is gone. But there's other things to think of, like Judith, and food, and Tyrese's group, and cleaning out the cell that she has claimed for her own, and Judith, and the odd way that Rick is looking at Judith now, and Judith....

"You've got a knack for that."

Carol's voice pulls her out of her thoughts as she makes her way up the stairs. The older woman is folding laundry, a small smile on her face as she looks at the baby. Beth smiles back.

"Am I holding her right when I nurse?" the blonde girl wants to know.

"You just do what feels right for you and her. Remember, we've got the formula if you need to stop or just take a break."

"Nah," Beth replies with a shake of her head, "I've gotta do my part."

"Sophia used to wake the neighbors. 3:00 AM, like clockwork," Carol tells her, "Ed stayed at a friend's most nights till she calmed down."

It's one of the first times Beth has heard Carol speak of her ass of a husband. She doesn't say anything about the tremor she can hear in Carol's voice, or the way her hands are shaking slightly at the thoughts in her head. Beth may not know what it's like to be hit, but she can remember the days when she was younger and her daddy hadn't quit drinking. Nobody thinks she remembers, but she does. Hershel never put hands on anybody, but the Greenes were once frequent flyers at the furniture supply and repair shop up the road and she's no stranger to the whispers and the glances and people looking her up and down at church on Sunday trying to find the bruises that were never on her skin. Bruises and scars on the soul are invisible.

Beth smiles down at Judith, who is cooing and happy and full. "I always wanted a child," she admits quietly. It feels so stupid to say, but this is Carol and Carol understands. "I had all these dreams about goin' to school and teachin' music and gettin' married and havin' babies. I know it's not going to happen, but it's nice to remember those dreams sometimes."

Beth will never have a normal life, she knows that. Knows the risks and understands how they lost Lori and knows she could never put her family through that. But she's telling the truth. It's nice to remember the dreams and the hopes and the normal she once had.

"She wouldn't have made it if Daryl hadn't been here. He couldn't stand to lose anyone else."

Suddenly she's angry. A burning feeling, almost a hatred kind of feeling cutting into her little bit of happy. Daryl had made her a promise and he broke it. Maggie was back, sure, Glenn was back, but Daryl had promised to bring them to her, and he hadn't. Merle had seen to that.

Beth doesn't get it. He's out there somewhere, roaming and unsafe, This Governor fellow was sure as shit looking for them, and even with Merle Daryl was on his own now. How can they all be okay with that? Daryl is theirs, Daryl is family, and she doesn't know what to do with the fact that he's gone.

"Sounds like him."

Carol has this hollow sort of look in her eyes and Beth knows that she understands what's going on inside of her head without Beth even having to say anything. Daryl can't stand to lose anyone else, but dammit neither can Beth. There's this new thing inside of her, and it churns around inside. It's a new kind of fear that she really can't explain, and it hangs on her heavier than the weight of the walkers that she's killed.

"I don't see why he had to leave," she says in a petulant, bratty tone, "Merle sounds like a jerk."

"Men like Merle get into your head," Carol says quietly, "Make you feel like you deserve the abuse."

Beth looks at Carol for a minute and sighs. She doesn't know much about Daryl, but it seems that he lived like Carol had at one point and told Carol all about it. It's a hard thought for her to wrap her head around. Daryl isn't big by most people's standards, but he's a heavy and unforgiving presence. He's rough and tough and dirty and everything Beth isn't. He's got something inside of him, a wildness seeking to come out. It's hard to imagine something like what happened to Carol happening to him.

"Even for Daryl?"

"I'm hardly the woman I was a year ago, but if Ed walked through that door right now breathing and told me to go with him, I'd like to think I'd tell him to go to hell."

"You would," Beth says without hesitation. "You would."

Carol has no reason to go anywhere. Even if she did say yes, Earl wouldn't have lived long enough to hear it. Beth knows enough about herself and the people who make up her little makeshift family to know that's true. Earl wouldn't live long if he was the next one to walk through the prison gates.

"Doesn't matter."

"It does matter."

Beth doesn't want to hear Carol talk about people like Earl and Merle anymore.

"Do you think we're weak without him?"

Carol reaches out a hand to stroke her cheek, "We'll be fine. We found our way before. If he wants to come home, he knows where to find us. Besides, that new group, Tyrese and the others, they seem just fine."

But none of those people are crossbow-toting, leather vest wearing, redneck assholes who would tear apart walkers just for some baby formula. None of them are Daryl and can make up for his loss.

"I'm pissed at him for leaving," she blabs. Beth bites her tongue right after. She hadn't meant to let that slip out.

"Don't be." Carol's eyes tell a different story, and Beth knows that the older woman is just as angry as she is. To cover it up, Carol spits something out about men and their codes and Daryl having one and the world needing more of it.

It's bullshit.

Chapter 14

Maggie isn't the same anymore, and Beth sort of understands why. Her sister isn't talking, and probably won't ever talk, and that's okay because she's alive.

She's alive.

They brought Michonne back with them, but she's hurt worse than before. Rick talks to Hershel about how long it might be before she can travel, and for the first time since they came back Beth realizes that they're two short, not one.

Oscar's gone.

Axel can barely keep it together, and even though he still gives her the creeps Beth stands and listens to him tell stories about his dead friend. She certainly won't give him what he actually wants, but this is something that she can give him. When he finishes Beth asks the question the rest of them are scared to touch.

"What now? You think the Governor will retaliate?"

"Of course," Carol tells her, "And from the sound of it he's got a whole town."

Hershel has a knowing smile on his face, "We could use some reinforcements."

Even though she's standing behind him and holding a baby Beth can see how he angles his head to where Tyrese and the others are locked up.

Rick's got a critical look in his eyes. He turns halfway before catching himself, and Beth knows that he was about to ask Daryl what he thought about the whole situation. Problem is, Daryl isn't there to ask.

Goddamn redneck asshole.

Hershel leads them into the room once Carl unlocks it, the others following closely behind. Tyrese stands up from his seat and introduces himself to Rick. These people are good at reading a room, they know who's in charge. They've never met anyone like Rick before, though, and he just glances over his shoulder at Hershel.

"Sasha, Allen, Ben." Her daddy is getting good at balancing on one crutch as he points to them individually.

Rick is all business, "How'd you get in?"

"Damage to the administrative side of the prison. Wall was down, climbed over the rubble into the building."

Rick's gaze turns curious, "That side isn't cleared, it's completely overrun. How'd you get this far on your own?"

Tyrese shook his head, "We didn't. Lost our friend, Donna."

"We found them in the Tombs," Beth adds.

"And you brought them here!" The force from Rick's voice and the anger in it makes Beth take a step back.

"They didn't have a choice," her daddy comes to her defense.

Rick may be willing to holler at her but he won't holler at Hershel. He just nods and moves on, tells them he's sorry for their loss but they have to leave.

Everyone is staring at Rick like he's just lost his marbles. Leave? They just lost Daryl, and while nobody can replace him here are four more bodies to protect them against this Governor fellow, and Rick is just telling them to leave? Beth bounces Judith up and down and holds her tongue. Tyrese is giving some speech about what help they can be, how they won't be a burden, Sasha is pleading, but Rick won't listen. He reminds them that they've been through this before, with the other prisoners who weren't Axel and Oscar. This makes them bow their heads a little at the reminder of T-Dog and Lori, who might not have been lost if things had gone a different way. He tells Tyrese he can't be responsible for them.

"If you throw us out, you are responsible,"

Then her daddy starts talking to Rick about second chances, reminding him that none of them would probably be here if Hershel hadn't taken a chance on them all those months ago. Something in Rick snaps then, and he's screaming and shouting and waving the gun in his hand around and the others back out of the room. Their family stays, Beth turns her back and angles herself just in case. The only way a bullet is hitting this baby is if it goes through her first.

What in the hell are they supposed to do now? Daryl is gone and Rick is crazy and Beth doesn't know what to do.

Chapter 15

He's not really sure exactly why he left with Merle. They haven't really even settled anywhere, just moving around like the nomads they once were. Not going anywhere or doing anything or having any kind of purpose. Merle searches every building they come across and more often than not he comes out of every room pissed as hell. Daryl's not dumb. He knows Merle is looking for something to score with.

'Didn' take ya long ta go back to ol' habits," he mumbles.

"Tha' fuck you say?"

"Nothin'."

It doesn't surprise Daryl how quick he turns back into the follower. How quickly he starts to mumble lowly again instead of speaking clearly. Merle does that to him. He keeps walking, keeps moving, keeps pushing forward but he's always two steps behind Merle. Except when Merle needs to take a piss. Daryl steps far away whenever Merle needs to take a piss. There's always some shaking and displaying and nasty jokes made whenever Merle is pissing, and he knows that Daryl can't stand it (which is why he does it).

Daryl makes the mistake of suggesting they go to the prison. It's a dumb suggestion, he knows. He knows enough of the Dixon marks to know it was Merle who had done a number on Glenn, and he knows his brother isn't the least bit sorry.

"There's nothing out here but skeeters an' ants. Ain't much food."

"There's more than nothin'." his brother cuts back at him.

Daryl makes some suggestions, talks about where they could go. Shelter and food seem like a good thing.

"For you maybe, but there won't be no damn welcome party fer me."

"Could all get used to each other," Daryl says weakly, knowing how dumb of a suggestion it is.

"They're all dead, so it makes no difference."

That catches his thoughts. They're not dead. They've got more fight in them than that. But then again, he's not there to protect them, so what does he know. But what does Merle know? What do any of them know anymore?

"Wat makes ya say that?"

"Speakin' of parties, the Governor is probably holdin' one for all yer friends right now, burying them under the rubble. Ain't nothing left there. Come on, let's hook some fish."

Daryl spits onto the ground and can't help but follow.

Later, there's a group of people on the bridge and they're gonna die. They've got a baby and Daryl can't help but help them. Merle helps too, and Daryl is reminded of just how different he and his brother are when Merle starts digging around in their supplies talking about taking payment. He points the crossbow at the back of Merle's head and it's the first time in his life he's ever stood up to his brother. Daryl keeps the crossbow pointed at Merle's head until the people pull their car off of the bridge and then he strides off in the other direction, not caring if Merle is following him.

Merle is blood. That means something, But he's got a new family out there and that means something too. Merle is chasing after him, demanding some kind of explanation and getting more and more pissed when Daryl's one-liner answers aren't satisfying him. An argument about helping people who needed it becomes more personal, becomes something about brotherhood, becomes about Merle's hand and Daryl's childhood and all the hurt in between. It gets physical and doesn't stop until Merle tears off his shirt.

The older brother jerks back like he's been burned and Daryl knows what he's looking at. Every scar he earned since Merle left and Daryl's momma burnt herself and their house to the ground. Every reminder of the piece of shit their father was. Every reason why Daryl is the way he is now.

"I didn't know." Merle tries to reach for him, but Daryl jerks back.

"Don't tell me you didn't know. It's why ya left in the first place."

"I couldn't stay," Merle tries to explain, "I would've killed him otherwise."

Daryl moves off and Merle demands to know where he's going, but they both already know. Merle tells him he can't go with him.

"Ya know, I may be the one that's walkin' away, but yer the one that's leavin'. Again."

Merle never could resist a challenge, and it isn't long before Daryl can hear him cussing behind him. He resists the urge to smirk.

It's hell when they get home. Someone blew through the gate and the fence and let walkers into the front yard. They can hear the gunshots and the tires squealing and Rick is pinned to the fence by two, no, three walkers by the time they get there.

They worked so fucking hard to clear that yard, and in one instant all that work has gone to shit. Rick is halfway gone, caught in some place in his head where Daryl knows he's barely there. He can hear the gate sliding shut, hears the chains rattle. They're on their own. He grabs Rick by the arm, pulls his arrows off of the heads of the walkers he just shot, and starts to run.

Someone has to come for them.

Someone has to come.

Tires squeal again, and the truck that brought hell upon them just vanishes back into the woods. Daryl curses under his breath. He can feel Merle behind him, running in step with him. Then the truck appears back in front of them and Daryl is ready to shoot the driver but a flash of blonde stops him. He doesn't even question what Beth is doing outside the fences and who the hell let her go.

"Get in!" she screams out the window.

They all jump into the truck bed, one after the other, and Beth hits the gas so hard she slings chunks of mud on the walkers coming up behind them. It takes a few long minutes before they're finally on the other side of the fence. He has to jump in front of Merle before Maggie shoots him.

"Nah, don't!" he shouts.

"Put him back outside the fence," Maggie screams back.

"I'm not leavin' him out there!"

"Daryl," Carol says warningly.

But then there's Beth, jumping out of the truck and leveling them all with that stare of hers.

"You make him go back out there and you're no better than him."

He's never been so grateful for her before. "Lock him up," Beth continues, "If that'll make ya feel better."

Carl is there, then. Carol too. Axel is leaned up against Maggie with blood streaming out of a blown-off ear. The rest of them look mostly fine, if a little shell-shocked and bruised. Glenn and Michonne got the worst of it, but that was back at Woodbury. Hershel is glaring at Beth something fierce.

"Inside," he tells them all, leaving no room for discussion, "Now."

And there's the baby, there's Judith, and he can't help but smile even as they lock Merle up. Beth won't stop glaring at him, her gaze cutting through him. Merle can't help but gape at the baby and Beth moves Judith out of his eyesight. He knows Merle can see him staring at Beth and doesn't even care that he will catch hell for it later.

He's home.

Chapter 16

Beth stands at the top of the stairs, as far away from Daryl as she can be. Daryl doesn't say a word when they lock Merle up, but Merle has plenty to say in their earshot as their family discusses whether to run or to stay and fight.

"You got a better idea?" Rick shouts at him when Merle won't shut up about how stupid they all are.

"Yeah," Merle fires back, "Should've slid outta here when we had the chance. Bet he's got scouts all up an' down the roads now."

"We ain't scared o' that prick." Daryl spits out.

That's a lie. Beth is terrified. This is the man who had Glenn beat to a pulp, this is the man who stripped Maggie of something that she still won't talk about, who had a sniper shoot through the fence and blow off Axel's ear. Another inch to the left and Axel would be as dead as Lori, and T-Dog, and Oscar, and all the rest. They have a reason to be terrified.

"You should be scared." Hell must have frozen over if Merle Dixon and Beth Greene are actually agreeing on something. "Truck through the fence was jus' him ringin' the doorbell. Sure, there's some thick walls to hide behind here, but he's got the firepower and the men to use it. If he takes the high ground, and he will, shit. They'll just starve us out."

Maggie is eyeing Merle through his whole little speech with murder in her eyes. "Put his ass in the other cell block."

"He's got a point," Daryl can't help but come to his brothers' defense.

Maggie pulls the knife out of the holster at her side and darts forward to the locked door. Beth flies down the stairs to yank her back, and it takes everything in her small body to hold Maggie steady. Her sister is screaming.

"This is on you! You started this."

Beth doesn't know what else to do, so she stomps on Maggie's foot as hard as she can. The pain seems to shock Maggie out of her rage.

"Doesn't matter whose fault it is," Beth says as she keeps pulling Maggie back, "What do we do?"

"I say we should leave," Hershel pops out. He's sitting next to Axel, wrapping some scrap fabric around the ruined side of his head, "Look at Axel. We can't just sit here and wait for something like this to happen again."

Rick has just been standing around, staring at nothing off in the distance. Sound finally seems to break through to him when Hershel speaks, and Beth can tell he doesn't like what the older

man is saying. He starts to stride off with his gun clutched tightly in his hand, and Hershel has had enough. He chases after Rick quicker than Beth has ever seen him move on his crutches and lays into the sheriff, giving him the hard truth that none of them have been able to speak.

"You're the one who said this isn't a democracy, dammit. Now act like it."

Chapter 17

The dark comes quickly, and for that Beth is more than a little grateful. It's easier to pretend that everything is all right and they're going to have a good day in the morning. She ignores Rick and Michonne as they patrol up and down the fence line, pretends that she doesn't head Axel's labored breathing in the cell below her as he calls out in his sleep from the pain ringing through him, pretends not to hear the clang of Merle beating lightly on the bars of his cell.

Merle.

She thinks she understands Daryl a little bit better now. Understands Merle better too. It had been Beth who had handed Daryl a new shirt when they had made it back inside, and though she had turned her back on him without a word she had seen the lines carving across his skin. She suspects Merle might have a couple of those under his shirt to, and even though her daddy had never put a hand on her, she's the way that she is because of what a mean drunk he had been back in the day. She can't imagine how she would have turned out if he had beat her the way Daryl's daddy had beat the two of them.

Aside from telling them to get in the truck, she hasn't said a single word to him in the hours since he has been back. She's not really sure she wants to say anything to him. What could possibly be said? He had made her a promise and broke it, all in one day. She's not sure why that hurts her so much, but it does. It pulls on something inside her, knowing how easy it was for him to betray her. Betray them. Blood was thicker than water, she supposed, and Dixon blood seemed to be the thickest of them all. Merle wouldn't have followed Daryl here otherwise.

Judith is quiet, nursing away at her breast, sound asleep. Beth is sitting up in the bottom bunk in the cell she has chosen to make her own, leaning against the wall. There's a shuffling of feet outside the cell door.

"Need any help?"

Beth scoffs, "I doubt you'd be much help right now."

There's shuffling again, and then Daryl is standing in her doorway. He's not looking directly at her, but Beth starts staring at him without shame.

"Baby aight?"

"Baby's just fine. They named her, you know. Judith. Think it suits her better than Lil' Asskicker."

Daryl nods, still not meeting her eyes. Judith slips off then, and Beth fixes her top so nothing is hanging out or showing. She shifts the baby up to her shoulder to burp her, and sees Daryl's hands twitch. She supposes she can be nice for a moment.

"Want to do it?"

Daryl shakes his head slowly and Beth sighs in exasperation. "Get your ass over here, Dixon."

He moves slowly into her room, like he's scared that any sudden movements might frighten her. He obviously has never held a baby besides Judith. He's all awkward movements and uncertain hands.

"Here," Beth says, his tone gentling, "Watch her head."

She helps Daryl slide the baby up over his shoulder and tucks a small rag over his skin. He turns questioning eyes towards her.

"In case she throws up." Beth murmurs.

Judith fusses then, and Beth begins to hum on instinct. If she had been standing outside of her cell, she would have seen Carol sitting next to Axel's bed with a smile on her face as she strokes the convicts bandaged head. She would have seen Maggie and Glenn clutching each other desperately (and she would have turned bright red for the position they were currently in). She would have seen Merle inch just a little bit closer to the bars on his door just so he could catch a few notes of her song. Her daddy smiling up at the ceiling as he laid down for the night, their current peril forgotten if only for a second.

As it was, all Beth cares about right now are the people in the cell with her, Judith letting out a small burp and settling back down against Daryl's shoulder. She transitions from humming to singing.

"You said you hate the smell of cigarette smoke
You only used to smoke when you drank
When you lived in Chicago
Unsure where the wind blows
I wish I'd known you in your wilder days
And now here we go
You got me falling in love again
You got a secret, I wanna keep it
I wish I'd known you in your wilder days"

Her breath hitches in her throat when she finishes and now she's the one who can't meet Daryl's gaze.

"I'm sorry Beth."

Hearing him say it doesn't make her feel the way that she thought it would. She thought she wanted an apology, wanted to have to grant him forgiveness. But now it's just making her feel hollow, and she realizes that she just doesn't have it in her to be angry anymore. There's not enough time in the world to be angry, not if they really want to live.

"It's okay."

"Is it? I shouldn' have done it. Shouldn' have gone."

She smiles slightly. "You're back, though. You came back, you and Merle. Don't think you leaving for a few days really matters. Not like you got far. Glad he came with you."

He looks at her in surprise, "Why r'ya glad I brought Merle back with me?"

Beth thinks on it for a minute, because truthfully she's not really sure why she said that.

"Merle's not good people, and he's not our family, but he's yours. So he matters. He may have done something horrible, but he's not like the really bad people out there. Not like the ones tryin' to kill us. Maybe this is his second chance."

She takes the baby with him and settles her back down into the bin, turning it so that Daryl can see what's been scrawled across the side

Lil' Asskicker.

"Damn girl," he laughs, "Who did that?"

Beth just shrugs her shoulder and smiles.

Chapter 18

They let Merle out of the cell. Don't really have a choice, honestly. They need all the bodies they can get. Carol eyes him distrustfully and pulls Beth to the side.

"You stay away from him, ya here?" she hisses at the younger girl.

And then there's Daryl, coming up silent as a ghost. He doesn't even have to ask what Carol is telling Beth, it's like he already knows. He's bouncing on the balls of his feet, tongue pressed to one side of his cheek like he's thinking hard. '

"He's not gonna listen, ya know. Beth's got Judith, and it's been a while for him."

"Well he needs to stay away from her!" Carol snaps.

There's something dangerous in Daryl's eyes. "Don't worry. He will."

Beth isn't present for the conversation that Daryl has with his brother, but Daryl stands a little straighter and Merle walks like a dog who's been kicked and Maggie must've been there because there's a shit-eating grin on her face that she can't seem to wipe off and Merle doesn't even look at her.

Which isn't right, because all Beth can think about is how she told Daryl that maybe this is Merle's second chance. So since Merle won't do it, she does it her damn self. They're eating supper a few days later, some warmed up beans and canned fruit when she plops herself down next to him in on the bench. She had purposely waiting till Maggie and Glenn were on watch. Hershel just watches and doesn't say a word. Judith squirms in the makeshift carrier Beth has her tied in from the change in position.

"My name is Beth," she tells him, all sickly and sweet at the same time, like something rotten is in her mouth, "And this is Judith."

She tilts the carrier so that he can have a better view of the baby.

"I take care of her since her Momma died. That's my job. That's what I do."

She shifts back to cover the baby back up.

"I can do a lot more than that," she switches her tone to something she hopes is more sultry and sweet and leans in closer as she speaks lowly.

"Yeah, little girl?" Merle leers, "Like what?"

Hearing Merle call her that makes her feel dirty, completely different from the warm feeling that spread through her whenever Daryl called her that. But him leaning in and letting his guard down gives her the opportunity she wants. With a loud clatter, her knife slams into the spot just in front of his legs.

"I've been on the run all winter with your brother and a man who used to be a sheriff. I can think of sick different ways to cut your dick off and keep you alive right now," (she's bluffing, but who cares?) "So do us both a favor and stay away from me."

Merle's got a challenging look in his eyes, but one glance at Daryl and Hershel and he slips back on the seat. There's a new sort of look in his eyes as he stares at her, one that isn't as filled with lust or desire anymore. There's a smirk pasted across his face that Beth isn't so sure what to do with. She's had her show of bravado, and the adrenaline is slowly draining out of her.

"That little knife won't do much for you out there, little girl."

"Maybe not," Beth shrugs, "But it's all I need to deal with you."

She slips off the bench and goes to the pot to get another helping of beans. Her daddy scoops some into her bowl with a look a little like pride on his face.

Merle may be an ass, but Beth thinks that he's trying. She hears him talking to her daddy, and apologizing (at least apologizing for Merle) to Michonne. He's smarter than she thought he was though, because he doesn't say a thing to Maggie or Glenn whenever they pass by him.

Andrea being alive is a shock to all of them. She approaches the fence with a walker pushed in front of her, and Beth hears Michonne scoff in anger. She uses the walker to make it past the ruined section of the fence till she's pressed up against the gate. They all work together to get her in, and then Rick is pressing her to the fence and yanking all the weapons off of her.

"Welcome back," Rick tells her as he jerks her into the prison.

She's dressed too nicely and smells too clean. They know where she's coming from. Carol is the only one with a hug and a smile for her. Andrea's face blanches when she catches sight of Hershel. She starts to say something, but stops when she sees the unforgiving look on the old man's face. She looks around, counting all of their faces.

"Where's Shane?"

The silence is her answer.

"Lori?"

Judith lets out a small squeak from where she's strapped to Beth. Andrea's eyes get wide.

"Lori didn't survive the birth," Hershel tells her, "She had a girl."

"T-Dog is gone too," Carol adds quietly.

"I'm sorry," Andrea tells them.

Beth wonders how she can be sorry when she had no problem living the high life while they cowered in the woods and cleared the prison and lost so much. Andrea keeps looking around, saying all their names, but they don't respond. They're different people now, and they don't know her anymore. She looks around again.

"You all live here?" she wants to know.

"Here in the cell block," Glenn responds.

Beth curses him under her breath. They shouldn't be giving away information like that. They don't know if they can trust Andrea anymore. She's been with the Governor for god only knows how long, and from the looks of it she's been living pretty high on the totem pole. Lord only knows what she does to stay there. There's an argument then, about who shot first and who is justified in this little war they're in.

"Look what your boyfriend did to me!" Axel rips the bandage off of his head before Carol can stop him and Beth resists the urge to throw up at the sight of his mangled ear.

"I didn't know," Andrea tried to explain, before turning to Michonne and accusing her of turning the others against her. She says something about Merle too, about him beating Glenn.

"If you didn't know they were there," Beth cuts in with a glare, "Then how do you know it was Merle who worked Glenn over?"

Andrea doesn't have a response to that.

Chapter 19

Beth tries not to let the nervousness in her gut eat her up. Rick kicks Andrea out of the prison. Then, Rick, Michonne, and Carl go on a run for extra supplies and more guns. They bring back an arsenal. Finally, Andrea comes crawling back with a message. A time and a place for negotiation. Merle is the loudest one protesting it, but Rick decides to go. He takes Daryl and Michonne with him, and Beth watches as they drive away. Carl is standing next to her, holding Judith tightly.

"They'll come back Beth," he tells her, "Promise."

She takes the baby back from him and walks inside without a word.

It's later when they're sorting through the guns the others brought back that she feels something brewing between Glenn and Merle. Merle wants to go out guns blazing, but Glenn doesn't want to put their people in the crosshairs. They don't fight, not right away. Instead they resort to insults and petty jabs at each other, and for the most part Beth ignores them. Merle is packing up a bag of guns.

"You're not going." Glenn tells him.

Merle ignores him.

"Merle," Beth says in warning.

He shakes his head at her, "Don't need permission, blonde."

"We can't let you."

"And you can't stop me."

Maggie is there, suddenly coming up behind Beth. "If you're staying with us it's gonna be by our rules. Michonne can do it, why can't you?"

That's not the kind of argument you should be making with Merle, but Maggie gets points for trying.

"This is my brother!" Merle shouts, "What's a matter with y'all!"

He tries to leave the prison, but Glenn is standing in his way. There's one heartbeat, then two, and then they're at each other's throats. It doesn't take long for Merle to pin the smaller man under him, one arm and all. Maggie and Carol rush to pull Merle off of Glenn. Beth doesn't hesitate. She aims straight up in the air and fires.

Chapter 20

Daryl knows from the start that this was a bad idea. They might as well just whip out their dicks and measure them, or maybe piss in the dirt for the lot of good this meeting is doing. He's right. They drive away with nothing resolved. The Governor wants them to burn for what happened to Woodbury, and they all know it. It was a losing game from the start. The only thing is that this man has no idea who he's fucking with, has no idea the kind of fight they have in them to protect their family and this prison they've made their home. He has no idea how far they're willing to go to keep this place safe.

He has no idea about Beth either, apparently.

He's on guard duty with Merle when his brother tells him he's got a story for him. "I was goin' after ya, or tryin' anyway. She pulled a gun on me."

No way Beth Greene shot at his brother.

"She didn'." Daryl protests.

"Got into it with Chinaman," Merle explains, "Fired straight up over all of us to get us to stop."

"Ya, that lil' momma shot up. Didn' even seem to think about the ricochet..she just fired. Guess she was tired of us wailing on each other."

Merle is smirking at him with a knowing look in his eye.

"I did it to shut y'all up." And then there's Beth, dropping off a bowl of food and vanishing as silently as she came.

Daryl watches as she walks away. There's a sway to her hips and a confidence to her walk that hadn't been there before Judith was born.

"Though ya said she's a kid," Merle smirks again, "Ya don' seem to think she's much of a kid."

"Man, fuck you Merle."

It needed to be said. His damn brother had no idea what he was talking about.

They build up their defenses. Load the guns Rick and them brought back, stash half of them around the cleared areas of the prison with a few bullets each and keep the rest in the cafeteria by the cell block. Carl had said it best, Michonne was one of them now. It was hard to ignore the kid with a smile on his face as he clutched the picture of his family. They have a limited supply of..well...everything so they have to get creative. It's too risky to go on another run, so soon after the meet with the Governor. They know he's out there watching, waiting, Biding his time.

They push the cars with no gas up against the fence and drain the tires so they can't be moved easily. They put metal sheets and wooden pallets along the dog run with gaps left for their guns. They do everything they can think of with what little supplies they have. They clear out another part of the prison and make it to the section with the guards quarters, which means they have access to some SWAT gear now. Shields and body armor and they feel like they've hit the jackpot. Something twinges in Daryl the first time he sees Beth in a bullet proof vest with the baby strapped to her.

Is he allowed to feel like this? To think like this?

Daryl curses himself out in his head.

She's just a little girl.

Isn't she?

Chapter 21

"He's never gonna forgive you if you leave. And if you do, I think we both know you won't come back."

"What's a pretty thing like you got to say to ole Merle?"

Beth looks him up and down with the a bulletproof vest strapped round her chest and a baby in her arms. "Heard you talking to my daddy."

"Oh yeah, little girl? What'd ya hear?"

"Enough to know you know howta read. Gotta admit, that one shocked me a little."

Merle chuckles and sets the bag at his side down, stalking up to her like a hunter with his prey. He's not looking at her though, he's looking at the baby.

"Well, ain't that somethin' I'd never thought I'd see again."

Beth shrugs Judith out of her carrier. "Wanna hold her?"

Merle looks like she just shot him in the chest. His arms swing uselessly at his sides and his mouth gapes open like a fish. Beth sighs in exasperation and grabs him by the wrist of his hand, shoving his arm across his chest. "Watch the blade," she snaps as she settles the baby against his chest.

"Tha hell?!"

"Don't wake her up," Beth warns.

Merle settles then, staring at the baby in his arms like he's a starving man staring at his last meal. His hand flips around under the baby to cradle her head.

"We're not sheep, ya know," Beth murmurs to him, "We're a family."

"Family. Sheep. All the same to me."

"Not to Daryl."

"What's it matter to ya anyhow? I'm like the devil to you people. Why ya even talkin' to me after what I did to your sister and the Chinaman?"

Beth smiles slightly, "Glenn. You can call him Glenn." She shakes her head slightly, "I'd like to kill ya, honestly," she confesses quietly, "Because now there's a look in Maggie's eyes that won't go away and I know part of that is you. But I have plenty of people in this world to hate, and I don't have enough room for you to be one of them. What happened at Woodbury, that's between you and them. You'll have to get them to forgive you for it, and maybe someday you'll forgive yourself."

Beth reaches down to take the bag of weapons. Merle doesn't even move to stop her.

"At some point, your'e gonna have to admit that you care about him. And if you keep pretendin' like you don't, it's only gonna make him hate you."

"Ain't no damn pussy."

"Didn't say you were. But you gotta choose Merle, and I wish you'd choose Daryl. He's good people, Merle, he really is, and how he's good people after what he'd been through with your daddy (don't pretend like we both don't know) I don't think you'll ever understand. Maybe if you stay you'll figure out how to be good people too."

Chapter 22

Fuck.

Just like that, it's over, it's done, there's a whole group of new people moving into D-Block, and nobody is pointing guns at them anymore. What's she supposed to do with that? What's she supposed to feel?

Beth doesn't know.

They had packed up to leave. She had taken bags from Carl and loaded them into the cars. They were leaving this place that had been so safe for them, even though it was so dangerous with the Governor lurking outside of their doorstep. Beth had noticed that Carl had been extra quiet, moving around without a word. It worried Beth. She wasn't sure what to think about it.

They blew up one of the guard towers. But the Woodbury people also helped to clear the prison yard. It was kind of ironic, considering they were the ones to dump the walkers into there in the first place. Gates had to be fixed, fences repaired, but the damage honestly wasn't as bad as it could have been. No, the experience itself carved a different kind of damage on all of them. Something that wasn't going away anytime soon.

It had been smart, unlocking all the doors to the Tombs before they left. There's a bunch of new walkers that need to be cleared out now, but there's time enough for that later. She's not sure how much time they have before Carl snaps. That boy was trying to surrender, and Carl had put a bullet in his brain without even sucking in a breath. Beth kind of gets it, she supposes. If she believed for a second that there was a threat, like Carl seems to believe, she'dve killed him too.

It still rattled her though. She'd be lying if she said it didn't.

She tucks it away for now. She doesn't have time for it. She's been feeling all tensed up and out of sorts since Rick, Michonne, Merle, and Daryl had driven away from the prison.

Andrea is dead. Michonne isn't one who's much for emotions, but Beth can tell it's tearing her up the way Hershel is torn up about Carl shooting that boy. They brought her body back, and now she's just another grave in their little field.

The sun is setting when they come back. Beth opens the gate to let the bike, truck, and bus drive through. It's mainly women and children. Carl hadn't been happy, but Rick had ignored him.

"They're gonna join us." There wasn't any room left for discussion.

Well.

Beth supposes it's a good thing. Strength in numbers and all that. But close-knit as her family was, they were quieter. More careful. Untrusting, if you will. Put these new folk behind a

gate and all of a sudden they think they can make all the noise in the world, even with the sounds of walkers still filtering up out of the uncleared sections of the Tombs. It only took an hour or so for these people to transform from their enemies to their neighbors, and even less than that for them to get comfortable in the prison. It doesn't just bother her, it bothers the rest of them too. Daryl looks like he's a cork ready to pop. He's all tense and brooding.

Rick kind of needs this though. When they came back through the gate and he had looked up at the dog walk Beth had almost been ready for him to have another crazy episode. But he hadn't, he had just smiled. And the others had smiled to, and now the Governor is gone and maybe there really is still some good in this fucked-up world they live in. These are the things that keep them sane, that make them human, that make them better than the people who tried to kill them and burn their world to the ground.

But just because this might be a good thing doesn't make Beth any less antsy about it. They all stare at her. Well, not at her, at Judith, and Beth is reminded of just how much of a miracle it is that this little baby came into the world. Merle joins Carl in shadowing her when he sees how uncomfortable she is with people approaching her, asking to hold the baby. They're scared of Merle, from what they know from while they were in Woodbury. Beth isn't too fond of him either if she's being honest but she's sure grateful for the way they stay away from her when him or Daryl are close. The other members of their family just aren't as threatening, she supposes.

They move Axel into C-Block with them, and his ear starts to heal up nicely. There's some grumbling from the people who got too used to the comforts of Woodbury, but it quiets down real quick when Carl snaps and reminds them that they could have been left in the woods to be walker bait instead. It almost makes Beth laugh.

Beth tries to stay away from the new group. She's got enough to worry about as it is.

Chapter 23

She's like a wound up toy ready to burst. In the first few hours after the Governor had vanished (and honestly, him vanishing just made Beth feel sick to her stomach but they were safe for now and he was out there, he wasn't in here so she wasn't gonna dwell on things she couldn't change right that second) her time is spent sorting people into cells, getting them settled. She doesn't even sit down until she rounds the corner and sees Daryl trying to bandage a wide slice on Merle's side.

"That fuckin' hand o' yours," Daryl is cursing and Beth bites back a laugh.

"Didn' ask ya to talk about my hand, did I? Just wrap it up ya ass."

Daryl's hands aren't made to wrap bandages though. They're made for strength, for protection, for making people feel safe.

"Lemme."

Beth passes Judith off to Daryl and unwraps the crooked bandage. It's wide, but not deep. "No stitches," she murmurs as she adjusts the wrap around his middle and ties it as expertly as she can.

"I coulda tol' ya that, Sunshine."

She just shakes her head at him with a smile.

"Gimme that baby, lil' brother. Imma go rustle up some grub."

"Carol's cooking," Beth tells him, "Looks like rice."

If you would have told her a few days ago that she'd be perfectly fine letting Merle take little Judith and walk on down to the mess hall, she'd call you a liar. As it is, Merle is one of them now, to her at least, and that's just enough of a reason to trust him. Merle's all Dixon, all hardlines and harshness, but there's a new side to him whenever he's around Judith. Besides, even if she didn't trust him she reckoned Carl was around a corner somewhere waiting for her to come around so he could stay two steps behind.

Carl....no, that was a worry for another day.

She looks Daryl up and down critically as Merle and the baby vanishes around the corner.

"What about you?"

"Nah, I'm alright."

"Ya sure?"

He leans against the wall and shrugs. They're in front of her cell, and without a word she slips inside for just a moment, coming back out with a bottle of water and a clean rag.

"What's that for?" Daryl asks warily.

"Clean you up," Beth explains as she pours some water on the rag.

"Look, Beth, I can just go down to the showers if you really think I need to."

Beth wrinkles her nose, "You don't want to go down there right now. Maggie and Glenn are in there."

He laughs, "Got an eyeful did ya?"

"Ya, and then some. More of Glenn than I could stand to see in a lifetime."

She takes his hand in hers and starts scrubbing his palms, washing the dirt and the stink and what she hopes is just walker blood away. He doesn't stop her, but he doesn't help her either. She feels him go all stiff beneath her fingers as she moves her way up his arms but she doesn't stop. Just keeps cleaning without meeting his eyes. It isn't until she reaches the top of his shoulder that she freezes, and then it's only because her fingers brush over raised skin and Daryl lets out a low hiss and snatches her hand, yanking her back.

She doesn't know what to say, just stands there as he stares at her with a storm swimming in his eyes. There's a new type of emotion, one she hasn't seen in him before but she knows enough to recognize it as fear. He's still got her wrist caught in his hand, and his grip is so strong she knows she's gonna bruise. She lays her hand over top of his clenched fingers as gently as she can, trying not to startle him.

"Sorry," she whispers, tracing lines on his fist with her fingers, "Sorry."

She glances back up to his shoulder and they both know what's there. "You can talk to me," she whispers.

Daryl snorts, "Bout what, huh? I didn' grow up like you, Lil' girl. I didn't have things like a pony and a momma that cooked for me and a daddy that loved me. I didn' have a Maggie, I had Merle, and sure he loves me in his own way but he was gone by the time I was twelve and it was all on me. I had a daddy who gave out beatings like your parents probably gave out presents. I'm all they ever wanted me to be, just a white-trash-piece-of-fucking-shit redneck!"

He squeezing her wrist tighter and tighter and tighter with every word he speaks until she finally can't hold it in any more and lets out a small whimper. He snaps back to himself then and releases her, looking at his hand in horror. They can both see the bruise that's going to blossom on her skin.

"Shit," he cusses, and she knows he's ab out to bolt.

"Daryl, no, wait," but it falls on an empty hallway. He's already gone.

Chapter 24

Beth is glad she's got long sleeves on and that she's able to pull them down to cover up the evidence of what Daryl did to her. Maggie and her daddy would blow a gasket and raise six different levels of hell. She cuts a small slit into the side of her sleeve and hooks it over her thumb so that there's no chance of it riding up. Daryl won't meet her eyes anymore, and has taken to slipping out of the room whenever he sees her coming. He's been in the guard tower more than anyone these days, when he's not outside fixing the fence or killing walkers.

Beth never gets guard duty. Never gets fence duty either. She isn't sure if it's because they can't lose Judith's food supply or because her daddy and Maggie have decided to tuck her back into their Baby Girl box that she's been fighting so hard to get out of. Hell, she's got a baby on her tit more often than she's off of it but they will always think of her as someone young and innocent and helpless. They don't get it. There's a new strength inside of her now, that was born from the first moment Judith latched on to her. Whether or not she likes to admit it, Beth is a mother now and with this new role comes a fierce wildness inside of her to protect what is hers. It scares her a little, that she's willing to burn down the whole world if it means that her family will be safe.

She's a ghost again, slipping around the prison quietly and helping wherever she can. It's odd seeing children and women and a few men skulking around (they're still not used to this new place all these weeks later) and Maggie and Carol can't be left to take care of it all by themselves. Carl is usually at her elbow when he's not at the fence, killing walkers with an ease that Beth wonders if she should worry about. If it's not Carl at her side, it's Merle, standing next to her with a fierce protectiveness she never could have anticipated.

She never tells anyone, but some of the older Woodbury women come up to her and demand to know what kind of man Merle is and tell her that it's not right.

Beth isn't stupid.

She knows exactly what they think, and she tells them exactly what she thinks about her assumptions. About how Merle may be scary but deep down he's a good man and this isn't her goddamn baby and even if it was it's none of their fucking business and they're sick for making it so. She says a lot of other things to, things that would make her daddy tan her backside and they slink back to D-Block with their tales between their legs. If she had turned around just then she would have seen a certain man in a leather vest standing in the shadows at the other end of the hall, but she doesn't turn in that direction. Instead, she slips back down to the kitchen to hand the baby off to Rick for his designated daddy time.

She may not have seen him at that moment, but Beth can't keep her eyes off of Daryl. It's almost an instinct these days, and she cusses herself out whenever she realizes what she's doing. If daddy or Maggie saw where her eyes stray....

But she can't let herself think about it.

He's just another member of her family, she tells herself. They have a moment to breath and it's partly because of him and she's just grateful. That's all it is. It's just how she's reacting to the peace of it all. She's got more time with all of them now, he's nothing special. She wasn't just worried about him a few weeks ago when that group went down to Woodbury.

But it's different now. Daryl is something that's always on Beth's mind, even more than Maggie, Carl, Rick, and all the others. The only one more important than him is Judith.

She's got no need for Daryl. No need to watch him ride away on the bike when he goes out on a run. No need to glance over at him during supper. No need to stick her head out the door of her cell each night to see if his candle is lit.

She's so full of the thought of him that she might burst.

But he doesn't even look at her anymore.

(Maybe if she looked up at the right time she would see that he's always looking at her, but they always miss each other in the moment.)

Chapter 25

Daryl hadn't been a fan of this idea from the start. But it was Rick's call, and it's really Rick's prison, and when Rick makes his decision he's more sane than Daryl has seen in days so he doesn't protest and he just follows the bus on his bike. He's a little grateful for Sasha and Tyrese, though. Feels like they might be good people.

Goddamn if he isn't starting to sound like Beth.

All these people make him antsy, and he's not the only one. But having them here means extra hands for the clean up and rebuilding the fences. It also means there's more mouths to feed and more people to take care of, but right now Daryl supposes he can complain about that later.

He's got enough to worry about with what he did to Beth.

He had been waiting for her daddy to shoot him, but then he sees the way she fixed her sleeve and he has to go be sick outside. His momma had done that, covered up what his daddy did to her, and now because of him Beth has to do it. Merle finds him in a sniveling sobbing mess and takes him outside the fence to an old shine shack miles away. They get shitfaced and have to drive the bike back with a hangover the next morning.

After that Daryl doesn't go near Beth. He's always yards away and careful to keep it that way.

Merle and Glenn both point out that the new people make them nervous, but it doesn't really bother Daryl until Rick decides they're going to pick up other survivors when they go out. First it's for seeds and farm equipment, and they bring some people back with them. Then it's for fuel for the cars, and some people come back with them. Every time they go out it's like they find someone new.

Daryl hates it. And the way he's built, the person that he is, he can't hide it. Can't hide how he feels almost trapped. Not by the prison, the prison is home. But it's not easy going from one small group to well over one-hundred people in less than three months.

Their planting and their building and maybe they have a shot here but that doesn't mean that he has to like it.

Just like he doesn't like what he's done to Beth.

It's a bit of a wakeup call for him, to remember that her type of sunshine and the joy she brings around with that baby on her hip isn't meant for people like him. He's been told once, he's been told a thousand times just how little he's worth and he knows it. He knows he's a white-trash-piece-of-shit-no-good-redneck. Nobody has to tell him twice. Beth is sunshine (which is what Merle calls her all the time now because he knows that it annoys her) and all things good and that kind of stuff was never meant to be touched by a guy like him.

She's not even legal. Her daddy would skin him alive if he knew there was something flickering inside Daryl whenever he caught sight of a flash of blonde hair.

The guilt he feels, the shame is eating him alive. It's a thick and cloying feeling, almost like someone was pouring hot syrup down his back. He's got no idea how to get rid of it, and he's not sure he wants to. This guilt keeps the idea of Beth locked away in his brain where it belongs.

And when they pick up a boy named Zach, and he looks at Beth like she hung the moon, Daryl tries to lock away the feeling of jealousy that erupts in his chest. And when Beth smiles back he tries to beat down the panic.

It doesn't work.

But he knows his place.

He doesn't say a word.

She's not for him.

So he avoids her, doesn't talk to her, and tucks her away in his brain.

Beth Greene deserves more than he can give her.

So when he catches them outside of her room one day standing so close, all he can do is watch as Zach leans in closer to softly kiss Beth. He turns abruptly, his crossbow scraping the side of the wall the only sound he makes. If he had looked back, he would have seen the sorrowful expression on Beth's face as she leaned into Zach's embrace and watched Daryl walk away.

Problem is, he doesn't look back.

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